

Postnatal exercise class

This leaflet explains more about the postnatal exercise class run by the women's health physiotherapy service at St George's. If you have any further questions, please speak to a physiotherapist caring for you.

What is the postnatal exercise class?

The postnatal exercise class is for women who have musculoskeletal pain, rectus abdominis diastasis (RAD) or pelvic floor muscle dysfunction after having their baby. The class will help:

- you to have a safe, controlled return to exercise after having your baby
- improve your awareness and knowledge of postnatal symptoms and how to help them
- improve your core strength and control
- improve your weight, mood and energy levels
- improve your confidence to do exercises at home.

Classes last for an hour and a half and run over six weeks. To get the most out of them, try to come to all the classes. Please let us know at least 24 hours before if you can't come so we can give your space to another patient.

Who can attend the service?

You can attend if your physiotherapist has enrolled you into this class to help you return to exercising after having your baby.

What exercises should I do at home?

You should only do these exercises if you have been advised to and taught by a physiotherapist or have attended the class.

It is important to do the exercises from the class at home at least two or three times each week to get the most from them. After completing the six sessions, you should continue with the exercises at home at least three times a week. Below are the main strengthening and stretching exercises you will do in the class. Pick at least one strengthening exercise and one stretching exercise to practice regularly at home. You can mark in this leaflet the ones you plan to practice.

Posture in Pilates

Good posture helps with low back and pelvic pain, so try to be aware of your posture throughout the class, and keep good posture while you do all your exercises. Use these tips to help:

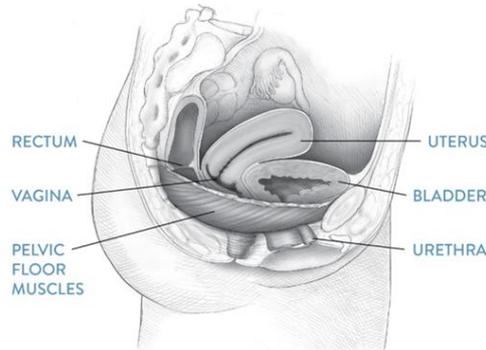
1. If you are standing, stand with your weight equally between the front and back of your foot.
2. Imagine your pelvis as a bucket of water. Tip your pelvis backwards as if you were spilling water out of the back of the bucket. You will feel your back gently lengthening and your tailbone gliding towards the floor. Now tip your pelvis forwards, as if you are spilling water out of the front of the bucket. You will feel your lower back arch slightly. Find your 'neutral spine' by resting the bucket halfway between these two movements.
3. Lengthen the back of your neck by nodding your chin downwards slightly.
4. Engage your 'centre' by gently contracting your pelvic floor muscles and transversus abdominis (see below).

Keep this posture all through the class and while you are doing your exercises at home.

Strengthening exercises

1. Pelvic floor muscle exercises

The pelvic floor is a large group of muscles which form a bowl shape from your pubic bone at the front to your tail bone (coccyx) at the back. These muscles support your bladder, uterus and bowel.



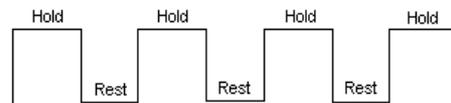
It is extremely **important to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles (PFM) after your pregnancy**, to help prevent problems with incontinence (leakage of urine), prolapse, lower back and pelvic pain, and to increase sensation during sex.

To exercise your pelvic floor muscles, slowly tighten the muscles around your anus and vagina, lifting up and in as if trying not to pass wind and urine. Do this either sitting or lying on your side.

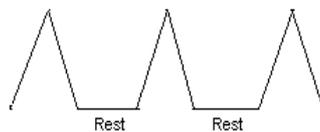
Avoid tightening your buttocks, squeezing your legs or holding your breath.

Do this 3 times a day in the following two patterns:

1) Hold for 10 seconds, relax for 10 seconds, and repeat 10 times.



2) Imagine the muscles are a lift and lift up as high as you can for about one second, then fully relax. Repeat 15-20 times.



2. Transversus abdominis (TVA) muscle exercises

This muscle is a key stabiliser of your low back, acting like a corset. It works with your pelvic floor muscles to improve your posture, which can reduce back and pelvic pain.

To strengthen this muscle, begin on all fours, keeping your shoulders over your hands and your hips over your knees. Try to keep your back flat.



Breathe in, then as you breathe out, slowly draw in your lower tummy towards your spine. Hold this position while you take three or four breaths, then release.

You should be able to keep breathing normally all through this exercise. If you can't, you may be bracing too much with your 'six pack' muscles, so try to relax these.

Class exercises

1. Chest press

Basic

Lying on your back with your knees bent, engage your TVA muscle. Draw your shoulder blades back and down. Holding small weights (or you can use a tin of beans or a small bottle of water), slowly raise your arms above your chest and then bring them down so your elbows touch the floor in line with your shoulders.



2. Press up

Kneeling on your hands and knees, gently bend your elbows out to the side, lowering your chest towards the floor. Then press through your hands and straighten your elbows, bringing yourself back up to the start position.



3. Gym ball

Basic

Sitting on the ball with your feet hip width apart, practice tilting your pelvis back and forwards.



Progression

Sitting on the ball, gently draw your lower tummy in towards your spine. With your arms outstretched, slowly straighten one leg then lower. Repeat with the opposite leg.



4. Squats

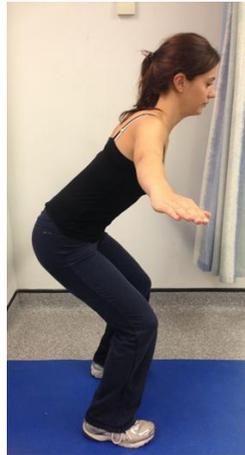
Basic

Standing with your feet hip width apart, squat down as if you are sitting onto a chair. Keep your back straight all through the movement.



Progression

1. As above, maintain squat and add five pulses, then rise back up.
2. As above, squat down then raise your arms to shoulder height and circle whilst holding the position.



5. Clean and press

Basic

Squat down keeping your back straight. Pick up a small weight (or a tin of baked beans or a small bottle of water instead) with your opposite hand then rise back up, extending your arm above your head.

Squat down, lowering the weight to floor.

Repeat 10 times with each arm.



6. Hundreds

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Engage your TVA muscle by drawing your lower tummy in towards your spine (see strengthening exercise 2), lift your arms one inch off the mat and gently pulse your arms up and down. Repeat for 10-20 pulses.



7. One leg stretch

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Slide your left heel along the floor and then return to the resting position.



Progression

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Lift your left knee above your foot into the “tabletop” position.
3. Straighten your left leg away from you.
4. Bring your left leg back to the tabletop position, then lower your foot back to the mat.
5. Repeat with the right leg.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

8. Hip twist

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Roll your left leg outwards from your body, keeping your pelvis still.
3. Roll your left leg back inwards until your left knee is in line with the left hip.
4. Repeat alternating legs.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

Tip: only move the leg as far as you can before your pelvis starts to lift or rotate.



Hip twist – level 2

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Roll both knees to the right, continue to roll your pelvis, waist and then lower back towards the Right.
3. Roll your head and neck towards your opposite shoulder, keeping your neck long.
4. Slowly roll your head and neck back to the midline.
5. Finally, roll your lower back, waist, pelvis and then legs back towards the midline.
6. Repeat alternating sides.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

Tip: keep your ribs flat on the floor.



9. Shoulder bridge

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Exhale and gently roll your lower back into the mat, scoop your tailbone upwards and continue to peel your spine off the mat, bone by bone until you are resting on your shoulder blades.
3. Inhale and hold the shoulder bridge position.
4. Exhale, lower the shoulder bridge by lowering one bone at a time back to the mat, beginning with the highest vertebrae of your bridge and finishing with your tailbone, to return to the neutral position.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

Tips: Your head, neck and shoulders should be relaxed.

It is not about how high you can lift but how well you can control the movement.



10. Clam

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Lift the top knee upwards keeping the feet together.
3. Lower the top knee onto the bottom leg.
4. Repeat lying on your other side.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10



Clam – level 2

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Lift the top knee upwards, keeping the feet together and lifted off the mat.
3. Lower the top knee onto the bottom leg, keeping the feet lifted off the mat.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

Tip: pelvis and back should not move while you are moving your leg.



11. Swimming

1. Kneel on your hands and knees, with your knees directly under your hips and your hands slightly forward of your shoulders. Keep your elbow joints soft.
2. Engage your lower abdominal muscles and slide your left arm and right leg out and away from you.
3. Return your arm and leg to the mat.
4. Repeat with the opposite arm and leg.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10



12. Double leg stretch

1. Lie on your back with your lower abdominals engaged.
2. Raise your arms up towards your ears, keeping your pelvis and ribcage still.
3. Lower your arms back down towards your hips.



Level 2

1. Lie on your back with your lower abdominals engaged.
2. Raise your arms up towards your ears. At the same time, straighten your right leg.
3. Lower your arms back down towards your hips, and slide your right heel back to the starting position.
4. Repeat with the other leg.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10



13. Scissors

1. Draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Roll both knees to the right, continue to roll your pelvis, waist and then lower back towards the right.
3. Roll your head and neck towards your opposite shoulder, keeping your neck long.
4. Slowly roll your head and neck back to the midline.
5. Finally, roll your lower back, waist, pelvis and then legs back towards the midline.
6. Repeat alternating sides.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10



Stretching Exercises

1. Cat stretch

1. Get into the position in the picture below and draw in your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles.
2. Roll your tailbone and pelvis downwards towards the floor, then round your lower, mid and upper back, and finally your neck.
3. Hold the cat position.
4. Then roll your tailbone and pelvis to neutral, lengthen through your lower, middle, upper back and finally your head and neck back to neutral. Draw your shoulder blades downwards and lengthen the back of your neck.

Sets: 2 Reps: 10

Tips: do not push to the extremes of range.

Arms should stay straight and legs should stay still.



2. Side stretch

1. Stand with your feet just wider than hip width apart.
2. Lean over to the right, feeling a stretch in your left side.
3. Hold for 30 seconds, then repeat to the other side.

3. Adductor stretch

1. Stand with your feet just wider than hip width apart.
2. Bend your left knee and bring your weight over towards your left leg – you should feel the stretch in your left inner thigh.
3. Hold for 30 seconds, then repeat to the other side.



4. Gluteal stretch

1. Kneel on your hands and knees.
2. Cross your left foot over your right ankle.
3. Push your hips over towards the left, then sit back towards your heels.
4. Hold for 30 seconds, then repeat to the other side.



We hope these classes will help you feel stronger and more able to carry on exercising at home. Joining a local exercise class will also help you to carry on improving your strength and ability.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about postnatal exercise, please contact the women's health physiotherapy team on 020 8725 1333 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4pm). Out of hours, please leave a message on this number and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

